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German Biotech Industry and Researchers Kick Back

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Report Highlights:

In reaction to the announcement of Agriculture Minister Aigner that she was considering a cultivation ban for MON 810 corn varieties and to the vote of Environment Minister Gabriel supporting the cultivation bans in Austria and Hungary, the German biotech industry, researchers and other agricultural organizations have written public letters to the ministers with copies to Chancellor Merkel, complaining about these positions and statements. Other interested parties have also weighed in publically.

General Information:

German Scientists and Biotech Industry Upset about Politicians

For the first time since the beginning of the European debate about agricultural biotechnology, German politicians' decisions and statements on the topic have brought forth strong responses and comments by the biotech industry and by biotech researchers. The recent announcement of German Agricultural Minister Aigner that she was considering a cultivation ban for MON 810 corn varieties and vote by Environment Minister Gabriel on the Austrian and Hungarian bans as well as his publicized letter to an anti-biotech NGO group has upset biotech researchers, the German Biotech Industry Association (DIB), InnoPlanta (an agricultural organization promoting biotechnology) and the German Plant Breeders Association (BDP). All of these organizations have written public letters to Ministers Gabriel and Aigner or made public statements about the situation.

The letter of DIB to Minister Gabriel, who recently voted against the European Commission proposal to lift the biotech cultivation ban in Austria and Hungary, expressed strong disappointment. The president of DIB points out that Gabriel is using a number of false arguments for his decision to support the Austrian and Hungarians cultivation bans. DIB in the letter interprets Gabriel's public explanation for his support of Hungary and Austria as nationalist and protectionist. In the letter, the DIB president also expressed concern that Gabriel's letter to NGO's could inspire anti-biotech activists to continue their unlawful actions against biotech farmers and researchers. Finally, the DIB president indicated that he was concerned that scientific evidence and recommendations no longer serve as the basis for political decisions. DIB forwarded a copy of this letter to Chancellor Merkel and to Research Minister Schavan. It was also released to the press.

In another instance, an open letter of the Researchers Group Green Genetechnology (WGG) to Agricultural Minister Aigner was signed by more than 1400 supporters within a few days after it appeared on the internet. The WGG letter expresses concern that Aigner intends to ban the cultivation of approved GE corn varieties although research has not identified any risk of these crops. WGG expresses surprise that Aigner and other members of her party intend to block green biotech research for personal and party political reasons. The letter states that it is very unfortunate that politicians ignore the results of multiyear risk research, which had been financed by a German Government, the same government that Aigner and Gabriel represent. The letter says that the current statements are a fatal signal to the internationally respected research position of Germany. The letter also states that it is unacceptable that members of Aigner's party demand that further risk research on biotechnology be restricted.

WGG demands that the German Government communicate the results of risk research to the public to counter unsupported, emotional and ideological concerns about the technology. Instead, the letter contends that responsible politicians have remained quiet or used vague excuses when research projects are damaged. This approach, the letter states, has the effect that researchers are seen to be the guilty ones for the destruction of their own research projects. WGG asks that Minister Aigner not sacrifice the great potential of this future technology to short-term political calculation. Instead, WGG proposes an expert dialog with the German Ministry of Agriculture so that scientific expertise can be used for political decisions and also communicated to the public.

The German Plant Breeders Association (BDP) has publically stated that Minister Gabriel's vote was based upon false arguments. BDP qualifies Gabriel's statements as a political farce with the result that politicians might be deadlocked by these positions.

InnoPlanta in its letter to Minister Aigner compares her statements with the political approach of the former Eastern German communist government, who told its people what is good for them. InnoPlanta is shocked that Minister Aigner, who used to be the CDU party speaker for research policy, is prepared to break her oath to support the freedom for research.

While these letters and statements have been publically released, they have not received the widespread attention that was afforded the anti-biotech statements. While down from levels of several weeks ago, media reports still focused on Aigner's statements about a potential cultivation ban and meetings of anti-biotechnology groups.